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**The Philosophy of Charlotte Mason
in the 1980s**

"I am, I can, I ought, I will."



BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Charlotte Mason was influential as an educationist from the latter part of the nineteenth century until her death in 1923. She wrote a wide range of important books including 'Home Education', 'Parents and Children' and 'An Essay Towards a Philosophy of Education'. She edited a journal entitled 'The Parents' Review' which has been published regularly since its inception in 1890, now under the title of 'The WES Journal'. She opened a college at Ambleside, 'The House of Education', in 1891. This continues as the Charlotte Mason College and is administered by the Education Committee of Cumbria County Council. Fourthly she established the Parents' National Educational Union which operates today largely under the title 'The World-wide Education Service of the PNEU' and the main function of which is to provide education to British families overseas. Through its home-school service it provides programmes (schemes of work together with the appropriate books) and professional support to families all over the world who decide to educate their own children; it assists in the establishment and running of schools overseas; it gives educational advice to both companies and individual families. Although the bulk of the work is overseas it retains contact with the 30 or so PNEU schools in this country. The exact nature of the relationship between these schools and the parent organisation in 1981 provoked a substantial amount of discussion. The following pamphlet was largely the outcome of that debate but it should also be read against the wider national educational scene and in particular recent discussion about the curriculum.

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INTRODUCTION

Of course one does not know what Charlotte Mason would have said had she been alive today. Nevertheless it seemed important to the Council of the PNEU to try to re-define Masonian philosophy in contemporary terms: they therefore established a small working party to undertake the task and this pamphlet is the outcome.

An organisation such as the World-wide Education Service (WES) of the Parents' National Educational Union (PNEU) which owes its inception to the forceful ideas of one person is faced with three choices: either it can abandon the original ideas as they become outmoded or lose their originality; or it sticks to them more or less rigidly regardless of the passing of time; or it seeks to re-interpret the ideas in the light of changing circumstances. The first two courses of action have not been without their adherents and indeed all three have their particular pitfalls. Nevertheless the Council considered that it was worth attempting the third: not only is there merit in retaining links with the past if this is practicable, an organisation such as WES/PNEU which is tending to become increasingly diverse needs an underlying philosophy if it is to retain its cohesion.

PHILOSOPHY

What emerged strongly from the outset of the working party's deliberations was the abiding soundness of Charlotte Mason's principles. The application of the ideas has, of course, changed and much of Miss Mason's terminology is unfamiliar. Nevertheless they do deserve to be highlighted and six inter-related strands can be identified:

Children as Individuals

First, the need for children to be treated as individuals – 'children are born persons'. This is not a sentimental version of 'child-centred' education, but rather an honest realisation that each child is different with varying talents and needs. It militates healthily against dogmatism in education and indeed it is encouraging that much recent research and writing on education emphasises the importance of varying patterns of organisation within the classroom depending on the needs of the children and the nature of what is being taught. The debate between 'formal' and 'informal' education becomes largely meaningless.

A Structured Syllabus

Secondly, the need for a structured syllabus. Traditionally this has been provided in PNEU/WES circles by the programmes; hence the importance which is attached to their constant revision. Nevertheless, in one sense, the existence of the syllabus is more important than its actual content. Most families will naturally wish to follow the programmes fairly closely, although as they gain confidence they will be encouraged to branch out in ways that follow the interests of the children and fit the particular circumstances in which they find themselves. Schools even more will wish to, and should, develop their own lines of work. Nevertheless the programmes remain a useful framework delineating the main areas of a broad curriculum and are there to provide detailed guidance in areas where teachers feel less confident. The important point is that there should be a clearly defined curriculum.

A Wide Curriculum

The third strand is the need for a broadly based curriculum: not that the '3 Rs' should be abandoned but they can only be developed fully by their application to a wide range of studies. It is here of course that the application of Charlotte Mason's ideas to the world to-day is so important. Certainly there is a valid place for such traditional PNEU practices as picture study, music appreciation and nature note-books. Nevertheless knowledge in such areas as science and technology has clearly increased, while thinking in these and other areas like language and history and geography has moved on in a way which one ventures to suggest would have met with Charlotte Mason's approval. There will therefore be new areas to be considered such as computer studies whilst others such as narration may need to be re-defined in the light of modern understanding about the development of language. There have also been shifts in thinking about history and geography in which we recognise not only the importance of the acquiring of knowledge about these subjects – they are an essential part of our cultural heritage which is felt particularly strongly by those overseas – but also the development of these subjects from the children's environment (some live in very exciting places!) and the encouragement of critical thinking which is the base of a further study of these subjects in later years.

A Stimulating and Enjoyable Curriculum

However above all there needs to be an enthusiasm for learning – 'education is an atmosphere' – and this is the fourth of our inter-related strands. Given an awareness of the individual child and a rich curriculum, education should be enjoyable. Indeed this is one of the recurring marks of the successful home school: the infectious enthusiasm of both parents and children. And similarly with schools. There is no excuse for time-wasting exercises or for fruitless standing about which merely bore the children.

The Teacher and the Parent

Which brings us to the fifth and sixth points – the roles of the teacher and of the parent which, of course, in the home-school are usually embodied in the same person. Charlotte Mason refers to 'masterly inactivity'. By this she does not mean the teacher does nothing but rather that she should not interfere or interrupt needlessly; nor should she pre-suppose what will emerge. Having provided the necessary raw material and encouraged the innate enthusiasm, the teacher should leave the child to produce his own work, not an aping of the teacher's own ideas. Indeed the very presence of the teacher provides a control even though she appears to do nothing.

However where the parent is not the teacher, as of course is the usual school situation, then the involvement of the parent in the educational process is invaluable. Charlotte Mason realised this: schools have paid lip-service to it but all too rarely acted upon it. Again it is encouraging that much recent work, especially into the teaching of reading, has highlighted the value of parents co-operating with teachers over listening to children reading. It is surely significant that virtually no child educated in a WES/PNEU home-school has prolonged reading difficulties. And it is a feature of many PNEU and WES schools that they draw upon the abilities of the parents whether they be manual, professional or intellectual!

THE CURRICULUM

The PNEU curriculum, from which the current programmes are derived, has always been based upon the acquisition of sound language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. Indeed it is interesting that 'narration', one of Charlotte Mason's distinctive contributions to educational practice, is an attempt to develop listening and speaking skills in a way which is all too often neglected nowadays. Secondly the curriculum should be based upon practical experience and the environment in which children find themselves. This is reflected in Miss Mason's thinking about mathematics and in her recommendation of the practice of nature note-books – another hallmark of the PNEU movement. Thirdly the curriculum should be broadly based. Initially this was conceived to include such areas as picture study, music appreciation and citizenship, but inevitably with the growth of knowledge in recent decades it now needs to be spread wider to include in greater depth such areas as science and micro-processing. If all this seems unexceptionable it is perhaps indicative of Miss Mason's far-sightedness that so much of current educational practice relates directly to her ideas. To obtain more of the distinctive flavour we must look at the application of these ideas in greater detail.

Language

It may be helpful to start with 'narration' – not because it should be slavishly followed today but because it gives an insight into the language skills which the teacher is trying to develop. Narration consists of four parts: introduction and recapitulation; reading the passage; the narration itself; discussion or practical work. The introduction and recapitulation provides an opportunity for the teacher to set the scene for the passage connecting it with anything done previously. The teacher must avoid giving a 'potted' version of what is to be read. Secondly the passage to be read must be a complete section or episode which is long enough to catch the child's interest. The reading must not be interrupted with explanations or questions. Thirdly after the reading comes the narration itself when the book is closed and a child is asked to retell the passage just read. With longer passages children can take it in turn to narrate while in larger classes it can be done in groups or pairs. For variety the narration can be done by acting or by drawing or, for older children, by producing a written account. It is most important that the child's concentration and flow of ideas should not be broken by questions or discussion, as it is at this stage that the facts are assimilated. At the fourth stage however – 'discussion or practical work' – there is an opportunity for the children to discuss critically what has been learned and explore further their own ideas. It can be seen therefore that this is a valuable method not only of teaching children to listen attentively but to order their thoughts in acceptable English (whether spoken or written) and to begin to think for themselves about what they have learned. It is also a useful basis for comprehension in reading especially with younger children. The passage may vary from fiction to history to passages from the Bible but they do need to have a reasonable framework or readily identifiable story. More than one passage will usually be attempted in the same lesson. Picture study and music appreciation can also be the starting points for discussion on lines similar to narration.

This emphasis on the spoken skills of language is matched also by the importance which is attached to reading and writing. In the teaching of reading

Charlotte Mason would surely have supported both the involvement of parents and the use of a range of approaches to ensure reading for understanding. In the early stages children should be heard reading regularly, and to be read to by others. Parents have an important part to play here partly because their involvement and support is a great encouragement to their children but also because in a busy classroom no teacher has as much time to devote to each individual as she would wish. It is hardly surprising that in our Home Schoolrooms, where parent and teacher are coterminous, children rarely fail to become both articulate and fluent readers at an early stage. It is not only a question of the one-to-one relationship which ensures encouragement and attention to the particular needs of the individual child, it also avoids the wasting of time.

However Charlotte Mason was hardly original in emphasising the need for children to learn to read as soon as they could so that they would have readier access to other areas of knowledge. What is perhaps worth mentioning is the importance which she placed upon introducing children to good literature. She felt very strongly that they should have the opportunity of being introduced at an early stage to the work of great authors, great painters and greater composers. This, of course, was part of her general attitude towards children: they should have nothing but the best and they should not be 'talked down' to. Charlotte Mason believed firmly in the high potential of children: she could never have been fairly accused of failing them because of low expectations. In consequence the WES/PNEU programmes continue to pay great attention to the books which are selected. They represent the best in modern literature as well as established classics so that children may grow up with a wide experience and enjoyment of original literature.

Another aspect of PNEU practice which stems from this is 'repetition'. If children have genuinely been fired by a passage or a poem they should be encouraged to learn it so that they have it for ever. Such learning by heart is in itself a useful discipline.

Finally under language skills come writing and hand-writing. Many young children find hand-writing practice tedious and although it should be made as enjoyable as possible by varying exercises and by constant short practice nevertheless good habits instilled at this stage are invaluable for later when the child will wish to write rapidly and fluently. It is particularly important that children should be taught correct letter formation from the outset as bad habits are difficult to eradicate later and can be the source of considerable frustration to both writer and reader.

In writing itself a balance has to be retained between accuracy and fluency. It is important that children should be able to express their thoughts fluently while at the same time doing it in a way which is acceptable in matters such as spelling and grammar. It is necessary therefore to emphasise accuracy in punctuation, spelling and sentence structure (English grammar). This can easily become a tension which is difficult to hold but in a school where there is the combination of enthusiasm and personal care, which is one of the PNEU hallmarks, the difficulties are minimised. Certainly there is little place for the mindless copying out of many grammar exercises which are merely a means of wasting time. Again it is important to recognise that language skills reinforce each other so that where there is a strong emphasis on speaking, listening and reading children will in general have far less difficulty in writing freely and accurately.

Practical Experience

If the acquisition of language skills is the basis of the WES/PNEU curriculum, the next step is the emphasis on the need to draw upon the child's surroundings and practical experience. Nowhere is this more true than in mathematics where Charlotte Mason recognised what is now generally accepted – that practical experience is essential to back up mathematical concepts. It is the application of mathematics to concrete situations which is important: the acquisition of computational skills is fundamental and thus a basis upon which more advanced mathematical work can be built.

However perhaps more original in her day was Miss Mason's emphasis upon practical experience as a basis for science and the study of the environment – e.g. 'patient, unflagging day-by-day observation and recording what he has already seen for himself. We must not confound a glib knowledge of scientific textbooks with the patient investigation carried out by ourselves.' It is against this background that we should see another of Charlotte Mason's distinctive educational practices, the nature note-book. Here was an opportunity for children and students to observe the habitat around them (whether it be urban or rural), to record, to hypothesize and to draw conclusions. Here indeed was an 'integrated' approach; not only did accurate observation form a valid basis for scientific enquiry, it encouraged writing skills, statistical skills and, perhaps most markedly, artistic skills – some of the nature note-books from the early part of the century show a facility in water-colour painting which is rarely seen in schools and colleges today. An added advantage of this approach for WES/PNEU is that so many families and schools are overseas. It is therefore an opportunity for children in such widely different environments as Saudi Arabia or Indonesia to make regular observations and recordings of what is about them: soil, rainfall, the night sky as well as the flora and fauna. Why do things happen at certain times of the year? How do various factors depend on each other? etc.

Similarly in history and geography – the humanities – it is important where possible to move from the known to the unknown. Again our families overseas have a tremendous advantage in being able to experience the geography of different countries at first hand. There is therefore emphasis not only upon the need to understand one's own culture but also to learn about other cultures with tolerance and understanding – but not uncritically; Miss Mason certainly saw the study of history as a means towards encouraging children to make judgements about people and the consequences of their actions. She believed firmly in the importance of source material – children should be encouraged to visit museums and, 'The child should get his first notions of a given period . . . from the original sources of history, the writings of contemporaries.' As one commentator (E. K. Manders) on her work remarked she would have approved of 'Jackdaws' – portfolios containing facsimiles of documents from contemporary sources – now sadly out of print.

However, particularly in the overseas setting, it is important not only to develop history and geography from the local situation, but also to instil in children an awareness of their 'own' culture which may actually be little known to them. They have a need for 'roots', which will include a knowledge of their country's history based upon a grasp of its basic chronology as well as a knowledge of their country's geography. This in turn can be linked in with other aspects such as music and picture study. In a multi-national context such an approach has widespread and challenging implications.

Finally under this section it is perhaps worth saying something about drama which Miss Mason tended to see, like painting, in relation to other things rather than in isolation. Certainly she encouraged the production of plays and especially Shakespeare. However we have also seen how drama can be related to narration and it was also seen as being related to history so that children would act out scenes from history – what in modern parlance might be called rôle play – thus giving them a practical experience of what might otherwise seem very abstract and difficult to comprehend.

Breadth

The acquisition of language skills and the encouragement of practical experience are the bases for a wide curriculum which is nowadays generally accepted as good educational practice – another example of Charlotte Mason's far-sightedness.

However before going into this in some detail, it may be a convenient place to mention the Christian basis of Charlotte Mason's thinking; she saw this as the fount of all her educational philosophy. Both her concern for the individual child and the inspirational nature of learning – 'education is of the spirit' – derive from her Christian belief and traditionally the PNEU day began with Bible study which, as has already been mentioned, was often linked to narration based upon a good modern translation. Times, however, have changed: not only are many parents avowedly agnostic or atheist, an increasing number of our families are members of different faiths. In these circumstances it must be up to individual families or teachers in schools to do what they feel is appropriate. However there are two aspects of Charlotte Mason's thought on Religious Education which deserve emphasis and which exemplify her wider thinking: first the understanding of Christianity should be based upon a study of the Bible and not some 'watered down' version; secondly we should never under-estimate the child's capacity for religious understanding.

To return to the main issue of the wide curriculum. Mention has already been made of language skills, mathematics, science, history and geography: we need now to turn our attention to picture study, music appreciation, civics and foreign languages. Picture study, of course, is another hallmark of the PNEU movement and is often the one thing which former pupils remember as being most distinctive. Again it is symptomatic of Charlotte Mason's thinking that she was anxious that children should be brought into touch with what was best in its field. Unfortunately not everyone could have the work of great masters in their homes, nor could they necessarily have ready access to art galleries, although that was to be encouraged, so she adopted the use of the next best thing: good quality reproductions. The emphasis is upon observation – of content, line and colour – and upon familiarity with specific painters and styles. And it is from this observation that not only appreciation stems but also the child's own work. As we have seen it is a similar emphasis upon observation in the nature note-books which leads to high quality water-colours of flowers and animals, and indeed to other aspects of the environment such as architecture.

Similarly with music appreciation: Charlotte Mason was anxious that children should have access to the work of the greatest composers. Nowadays with high quality sound reproduction this is even easier than in her day and most families wherever they be in the world have a cassette tape-recorder if not a record player.

It should not however be thought that the PNEU movement has merely

stood for a highly refined version of British culture. Apart from anything else Charlotte Mason was anxious that her ideas should be applied to all levels of society: she was élitist merely in the sense that she felt only the best was good enough for all children – although one might agree that it begs the question as to what is 'the best' and who decides upon it! Nevertheless, as has already been remarked upon under history and geography, she was also anxious that children should have a sympathetic understanding of other societies. To this end she was keen that children should learn a foreign language from an early age. In the United Kingdom this has tended to be French but overseas it might well be the local language of the country in which families find themselves. Several WES/PNEU children are indeed bilingual from an early age.

But children should also have a clear understanding of the workings of their own society and, although it is a subject which has tended to lapse, it is interesting to note that Charlotte Mason advocated the teaching of citizenship – '... they are enabled to answer – "What do you know of (a) County Councils (b) District Councils (c) Parish Councils?"' Children should therefore be aware of current affairs both local and international. In particular, times of elections are a good opportunity for involving children in the current political situation. Which in a sense brings us full circle: it has always been the aim of the PNEU movement to adapt the curriculum to the needs of a changing society so that children can play a constructive part in that society. It is therefore important not only that they should know how it works but also how it is changing. Thus, who can doubt that the computer will have a lasting impact upon our lives as we know them? And it is surely significant that in many schools where teachers regard the new technology with grave suspicion, albeit unadmitted, children from an early age are anxious to experiment with micro-processors and put them to their use.

Finally, in this section on the curriculum we should return to the programmes of work. Charlotte Mason certainly advocated a broad curriculum and in many instances recommended innovations. However it was a clearly structured curriculum and was not intended to be random or arbitrary. As far as the home-school is concerned this has presented little difficulty: most parents educating their own children want more guidance rather than less. In the case of teachers however it is rather different; current practice in the United Kingdom has encouraged greater freedom for the teacher and, although recently there has been a swing against this, nevertheless many teachers resent being told what to teach. To them it should be said that the programmes are a criterion against which to measure themselves. They give an indication of levels appropriate to differing age groups; they give guidance on the width of the curriculum; they can be followed in greater detail in areas where the teacher feels less confident; but if they are abandoned the teacher should be quite clear what is being put in their place and the reasons for so doing.

RELATIONSHIPS

In the first two main sections of this pamphlet we have touched upon the philosophical basis of Charlotte Mason's educational ideas and the way in which they have come to be worked out in the curriculum. It remains to discuss the framework within which education can take place and in particular the relationships between children, parents and teachers. Inevitably there is considerable overlap but for convenience we will deal with the subject under three headings.

Children

It has already been noted that Charlotte Mason was one of the first educational thinkers to treat children as individuals who were to be taken seriously in their own right. This leads not only to an awareness of individual needs and talents but also, as we have seen, to an expectation of high achievement. It is therefore hardly surprising that one of the most successful achievements of the PNEU movement and now the World-wide Education Service have been the home-schools. Not only are they successful they are probably unique in the way in which they help and encourage parents to educate their own children – very different from the typical correspondence course. Here in the one-to-one relationship between child and parent can be seen the working out of so many of Miss Mason's ideas which have clearly stood the test of time.

Their application to schools perhaps requires rather more explanation. A school, of course, cannot provide the same degree of individual attention as one achieves in the home although the skilled teacher will organise her class in such a way as to ensure that the children are effectively occupied for as much of the time as possible. Also, bearing in mind the varying needs of the children, she will change her classroom organisation to suit those needs sometimes using class teaching, sometimes organising the children into groups and sometimes concentrating on individual children. Certainly she will know each child personally and it is perhaps significant that most PNEU and WES schools are small enough so that individual children are known to the headteacher as well. This concern for the individual child should also show itself in the records which the school keeps about its children: not only their strengths and weaknesses but also an accurate and up-to-date record of their achievements.

Finally there are two other aspects of school life which deserve mention in this section: competition and discipline. Charlotte Mason recognised that competition between children can become destructive; instead she placed emphasis on the need for each child to compete against him- or herself. Similarly with team games: the competitiveness can get out of hand but if they are a means to enabling children to win and lose gracefully then that is helpful. As to discipline, great emphasis is laid upon the need to provide plenty of interesting material for children to be absorbed in; secondly upon a framework of self-discipline within which learning can take place – 'the discipline of habit' – habits of concentration, attention, careful work and courtesy.

Parents

It is evident that Charlotte Mason's ideas about the involvement of parents in their children's education finds its fullest expression in the home-school. It is entirely consistent with her thinking that she should conceive of it as being of value to both parents who educate their own children and to teachers who work in schools. There is therefore no place either for the arid, defensive professionalism of a minority of teachers who think that they alone can educate children or for those parents who are suspicious of all schools. Each child and family is unique. Depending on circumstances which will include, obviously, geographical location and the needs of a specific child at a particular time, home schooling may be the most suitable choice. In such cases, given the right relationship between child and parent, it can be a highly successful and enjoyable mode of education. Obviously different from ordinary schools, the home-school has many compensations as parents who try it soon find out.

The majority of children will, of course, continue quite rightly to attend an ordinary school. As has already been indicated the parent still has an important although less central role to play: for younger children, reading stories and listening to them being read; for all children, talking intelligently and interestedly about what they do at school. If there are worries then they should be shared with teachers. Support should be given to school policy about homework and sensible habits encouraged about going to bed and watching television or 'video'. Above all the relationship should be one of partnership so that each supports the other. In order to achieve this there need to be easy means of communication which can be encouraged in a variety of ways. Perhaps more than anything else a relaxed, friendly atmosphere is encouraging to parents as well as children. They are made to feel welcome so that not only can anxieties be shared but offers of help accepted. Sometimes this will involve assisting during the school day as voluntary helpers or providing a particular skill or experience which the teaching staff do not possess. For example in some schools parents of different faiths talk to the children about what they believe and about their religious practices. Elsewhere parents are active in practical jobs around the school whilst in other places parents provide financial and legal skills that might otherwise be lacking. As there must be respect for the child so also there needs to be mutual respect between parent and teacher.

Teachers

Much has already been said and implied about the role of teachers. One comes back to the concept of 'masterly inactivity'. It implies a great deal of planning and preparation so that when the teacher is actually with children she can be quietly available not only to let the learning process take place but to encourage and help individual children as the need arises. It produces disciplined activity and a willingness to be flexible according to the interests and enthusiasms of the children but within an overall framework. Usually the classes will be mixed ability and the pattern of classroom organisation will vary according to the needs of the children and the nature of the material being taught.

CONCLUSION

By way of conclusion it may be helpful to consider the PNEU motto, 'I am, I can, I ought, I will', because it encapsulates Miss Mason's approach to educational philosophy. First of all each child, each person exists as an individual – 'I am'. Secondly that individual has a potential not only for doing things but also for making choices – 'I can'. Thirdly the choices imply a moral decision between doing right and doing wrong – 'I ought'. Finally, once the choice has been made it has to be carried into practice – 'I will'. Such an approach not only ensures that each child (or each parent and each teacher) is treated as a person of importance but that as children grow up they will develop their true potential and will become self-reliant grown-ups capable of thinking for themselves and standing by their decisions. Indeed the PNEU badge, a skylark, represents the ability of everyone to aspire to great heights and remain there!

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